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BLM - ALASKA

FRONTIERS

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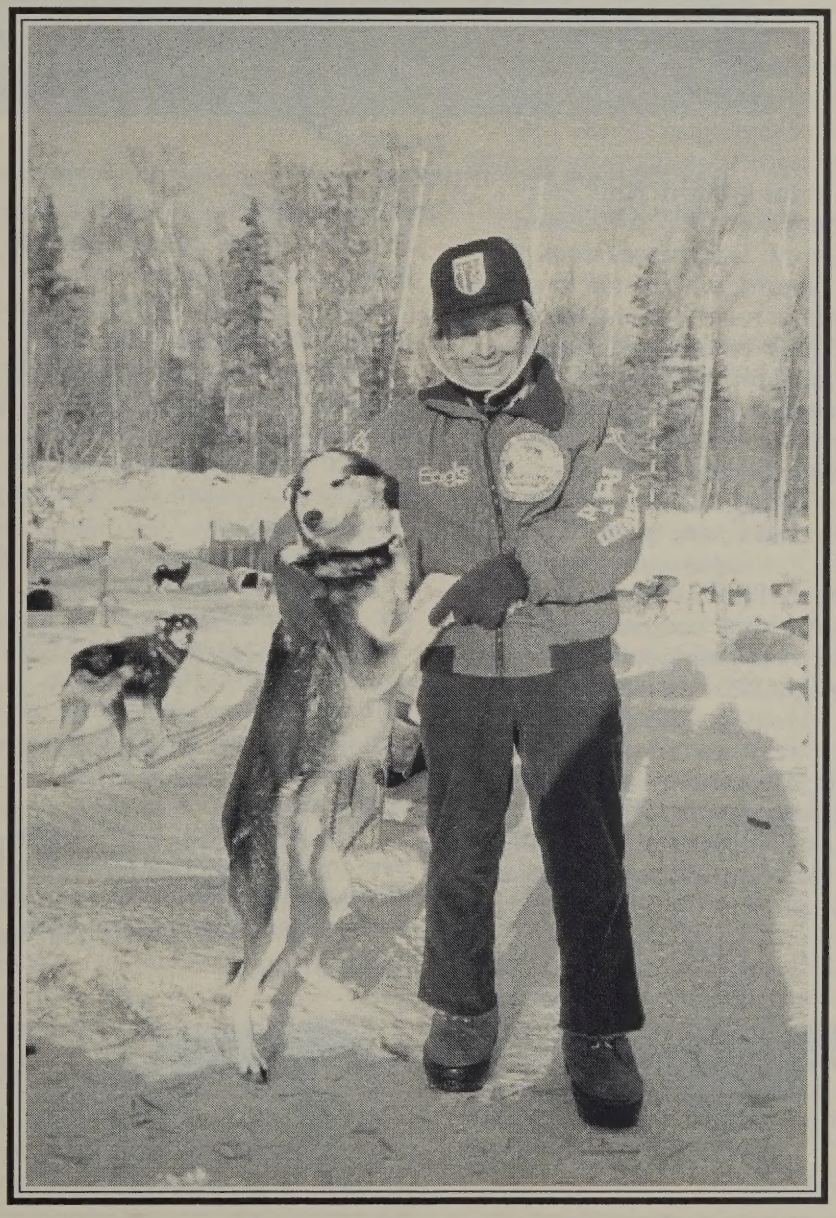
Iditarod Trail work is never done

It seemed like the Iditarod Trail had always been a part of Joe Redington's life. For 50 years, ever since he and his wife, Vy, homesteaded in Knik, he mushed dogs on the Iditarod Trail. Redington kenneled 200 dogs at his home outside Wasilla, where the trail cuts through.

Joe Redington passed away at his Knik home on June 24 after an 18-month struggle with esophageal cancer.

Redington had a long history of working on the trail. In 1956, the Army hired him to mark the Iditarod Sled Dog Race trail from Knik to Skwentna. "I identify more with the trail than I do with the race," Redington said, adding that other aspects are just as important, such as the history of the Iditarod and the people who use it.

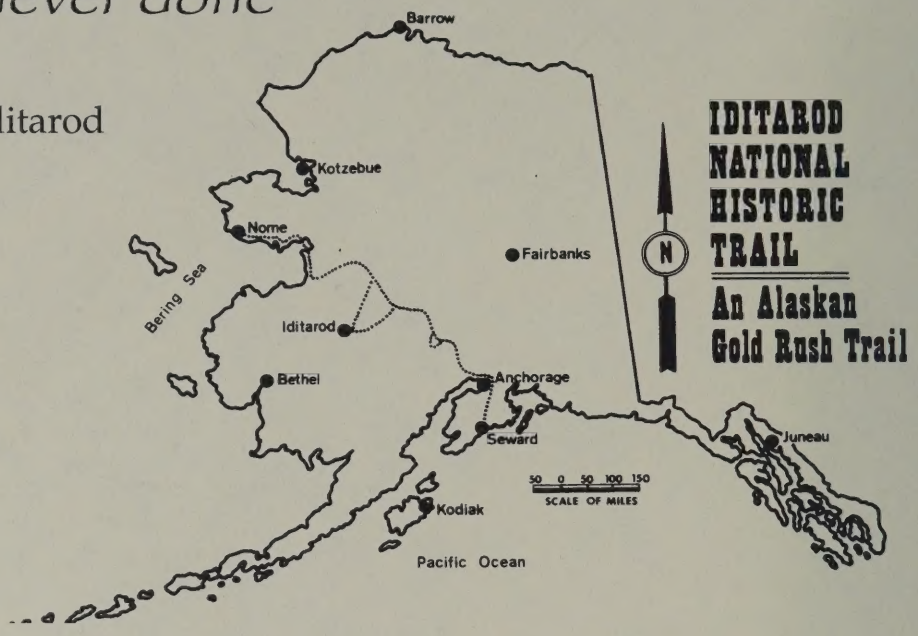
Although his days as a member of BLM's Iditarod National Historic Trail Advisory Council ended when the council sunsetted last year, Redington continued his association with the Bureau of Land Management through the newly-formed Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc. (INHT, Inc.), a nonprofit corporation devoted to the development and maintenance of this very special historic national trail.



Ed Bovy

"Trail work is never done"

— Joe Redington,
"father" of the Iditarod



Anyone who has lived in Alaska very long knows that Joe Redington was often referred to as the "father" of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

After an 18-month struggle with esophageal cancer, Joe Redington passed away on June 24 at his home in Knik, near where the Iditarod National Historic Trail passes through.

Redington wanted to see the historic roadhouses along the Iditarod rebuilt, and the trail from Knik to Skwentna returned to good shape. "We only use seven miles of the original trail," he said.

Redington came from Pennsylvania where in the '50s and '60s, "... there were beautiful national trails." He worked with former congressman Mike Gravel to help get the Iditarod designated a national trail.

Many people don't know that he was a longtime member of the Bureau of Land Management's Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT) Advisory Council, since it was established in the 1970s. The role of the council was to advise the Secretary of the Interior, and all Iditarod trail managers and cooperators, on the Iditarod Comprehensive Management Plan.

When the council was terminated in November 1998, Redington and four other council members formed a nonprofit organization called the Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc. (INHT, Inc.) to continue working on Iditarod Trail issues. INHT, Inc. and BLM are developing a cooperative agreement so BLM can help fund future projects. Priorities include installing permanent tripods, marking trails and reconstructing existing structures.

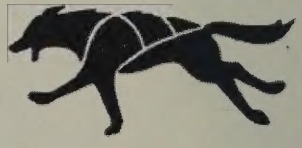
The INHT, Inc. board members include Leo Rasmussen and Irene Anderson from Nome; Dan Seavey from Seward; and Greg Bill from Wasilla.

Redington didn't start dog mushing until he was 57. He had recently turned 82, and was still excited about the trail. Although he didn't run the Iditarod Sled Dog Trail Race this year, he planned to race to Nome next year, and continue his association with BLM through his work with the INHT, Inc.

Although Redington never won the 1,026-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, he led several Iditarod races, and four times he finished as high as fifth place — the last time in 1988 at the age of 71.

Alaska Governor Tony Knowles ordered flags flown at half-staff in Redington's honor on June 25-26.

—Danielle Allen



EFF add helicopter crew skills to their job

The Alaska Fire Service (AFS) is now training emergency fire-fighters (EFF) to become helicopter crew members. Previously, the job had been assigned to fire suppression specialists (FSS).

The firefighters are instructed on helicopter safety, performance limitations and load calculations, makes and models, contract administration, fueling, transportation of cargo, and helibase and helispot operations.

AFS has about 35 FSS and brings more from the Lower 48 as needed. Most of the students were recruited from crew rosters by the Tanana Chiefs Conference, an Alaska Native Corporation. After recruits are qualified, AFS and the state Division of Forestry, which also has EFF's in the class, will hire them as needed to work at the helicopter bases. AFS and the state call on 73 EFF crews in 55 communities — mostly Alaska Native villages — usually for extended attacks on large wildfires.

The program frees up FSS's for other missions and also serves as a recruiting tool, says FSS branch chief Rex McKnight. McKnight credits Peter Solomon, a former FSS, with getting AFS and the Tanana Chiefs Conference together.

—Andy Williams

School's out — but not for firefighters

At the village of Koyuk each year, firefighters take the Pack Test, carrying a 45-pound pack for three miles in 45 minutes or less.

The Alaska Fire Service (AFS) has finished training first-time firefighters in the village of St. Michael, located on the southeast shore of Norton Sound in the Galena Zone. Training officers visited all 21 villages in the zone, where 28 crews are designated, to give pack tests and refresher training to regional Emergency Firefighters (EFF).

Galena fire management officer Ken Coe says they put on training every four years for first-time firefighters, usually at the local schools after school is out. After St. Michael, AFS teams held three-day training sessions in Marshall, Mountain Village, Shungnak, Buckland and Koyukuk. Attendance ranges from half a dozen to more than 50, but Coe says the average is 15 to 20.

In all 21 villages, nearly 1,000 people seeking employment on the EFF crews participated in the Pack Test. Participants must carry a 45-pound pack through the village of Koyuk for three miles, in 45 minutes or less. Coe says 85 percent of the people who took the test passed — above the national average.

Crew members must also pass a fireline refresher safety course before being issued fire qualification cards. In a busy year, all crews may be hired, adding millions of dollars to area economies. Skills learned growing up in rural Alaska make EFF crews good firefighters. They are highly praised, both on fires in Alaska and the Lower 48.

The *Alaska Emergency Firefighter Crew Management Guide*, developed by government agencies and the Alaska Federation of Natives, outlines procedures under which crews operate.

Coe believes the EFF system is successful because it benefits both the villages and the government. "We have a huge resource on an on-call basis. The alternative would be to maintain a much larger full-time work force even when we don't have any work for them."

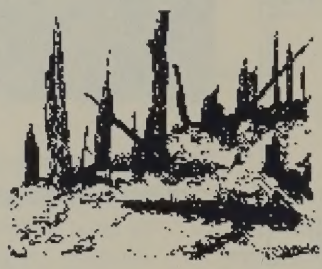
—Andy Williams

Rediscovering fire

A *wildfire* is any wildland fire that is unwanted and requires suppression. As an enemy, wildfire is dangerous and likely to become destructive.

A *prescribed fire* is the right kind of fire, in the right place, at the right time. As a tool, prescribed fire can help produce the kinds of vegetation and landscapes we want.

NO FIRE



WILDFIRE

PRESCRIBED FIRE

As immortalized in Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* fifty years ago, plane loads of elite wildland smokejumpers soar over remote areas miles from the nearest road, step into the air and fall back to earth with parachutes billowing, prepared for anything. But this year, under a new federal policy, they may start as many fires as they suppress.

Recently, in a dry *La Nina* spring, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt joined jumpers and officials at Boise's National Interagency Fire Center to mark the complete overhaul and improvement of wildland fire policies that are now safer, healthier, and less costly and destructive for firefighters, taxpayers and land.

Babbitt called attention to results of agencies and states increasing the number and size of prescribed fires (by more than 172%); aggressively thinning small trees in forests choked with fuel, including national parks; and reducing smoke through fuels management plans completed with the Environmental Protection Agency's Air Quality and Standards office.

"Five years ago I heard some very bad news," said Babbitt. "Fourteen firefighters were missing and believed dead from an extreme fire that blew up near Grand Junction, Colorado. I spoke with the grieving families and they all felt what one said specifically: 'I hope that you are going to change things to make sure this doesn't happen again.'"

As a result, Babbitt and Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman worked through the Federal Wildland Fire Policy and Program Review to find ways to work more closely with states, counties, contractors and each other.

The result is a new science of fire management, and in the process, they confirmed what many had long suspected: fire is natural. Suppressing fires builds up fuel — deadwood, old trees, etc. That fuel load means wildland fires now burn several hundred degrees hotter, twenty-one times bigger, and spread many seconds faster, growing ever more lethal, destructive and expensive to fight. "In the 1970s we spent millions each year to put out wildfires. A few years ago we spent more than a billion. It was time for an overhaul," said Babbitt.

Babbitt says that over the past century, grazing, logging old growth, development of homes in fire-prone zones, and above all, fire suppression, has worsened the crisis. "We have to integrate ... fire operations into annual land management decisions." Together, five federal agency land managers in Alaska are planning more than a dozen prescribed fires this summer to reduce hazardous fire conditions and improve wildlife habitat.

The prescribed fires include

Frostfire, a 2,200-acre burn at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) to study the ecological effects of wildfire. The BLM Alaska Fire Service (AFS) will assist the state Division of Forestry, the U.S. Forest Service and UAF on the fire planned in the Caribou-Poker Creeks Research Watershed north of Fairbanks. AFS will also conduct prescribed fires on 5,000 acres on Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force bases, and will assist with operations on fires planned by the state Division of Forestry, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

There is also a benefit to taxpayers — conducting prescribed fires typically costs about $25 to $30 per acre, but suppressing wildfires can range from $500 to $1,600 per acre, depending on the severity.

Big changes for AFS communications

Changes in electronic communication devices will revamp the way the Alaska Fire Service (AFS) provides field communications in the coming years. The present radio system connects aircraft, dispatch centers and personnel in the field. Telecommunications planner Ken Kokjer says AFS maintains 40 to 50 sites for itself and other agencies.

AFS is now required to adopt narrow-band and digital technology to its communications system. Will the new satellite technology make the system of mountain and hilltop radios now used by AFS obsolete?

To meet the new digital standard, equipment will need to be replaced at all remote stations. Though outdated, Kokjer says, the present radio system has some advantages over the new technology. One is that currently, solar batteries provide all the energy needed; digital transmitters require 10 times more power, and it's uncertain whether solar power can provide the power needed. Narrow-banding, by comparison, simply means reducing the radio frequency's bandwidth from 25 Kilohertz to 12.5 kHz, which, says Kokjer, is relatively easy.

Kokjer says a new satellite telephone system by Iridium LLC can perform most of what AFS needs in telecommunications. BLM-Alaska bought 48 of the new phones and will be checking them out this summer. The phones have a greater reach than the radios, beyond the range of the repeaters. Eight phones are assigned to smokejumper aircraft, while others are assigned through the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center.

Mountaintop repeater

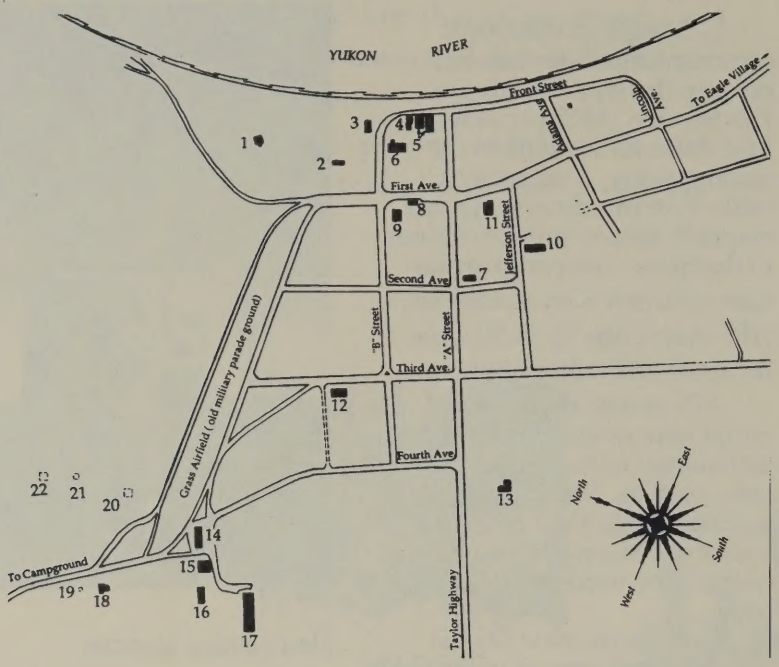
Kokjer says one remaining need involves flight following — the practice of tracking the position of aircraft. Kokjer says Iridium is working on a data channel that might allow AFS to automate flight following.

The other shortcoming involves the "party-line" nature of radio communications. People can listen in on radio traffic. There are times when that's important, such as when a retardant aircraft en route to a fire needs to communicate with the dispatch office and those at the fire. Kokjer says Iridium plans to open a "net-voice" system this summer to serve as a multi-party channel.

No one expects hand-held radios to be replaced on fires, where portable repeaters can be set up and a local radio network established. For other fire and resource needs, however, the new satellite telephones may be the answer.

—Andy Williams

Fort Egbert celebrates 100 years!



1. Yukon-Charley National Preserve Headquarters
2. Eagle City Hall
3. church
4. Customs House Museum
5. Northern Commercial Co. store and warehouse
6. Taylor Building
7. Eagle Public Library
8. wellhouse
9. Wickersham Courthouse
10. Post Office and Customs
11. Eagle Roadhouse
12. Redmen Hall
13. original Eagle schoolhouse
14. Army Quartermaster storehouse
15. water wagon shed
16. granary
17. mule barn
18. Non-Commissioned Officer Quarters
19. bakery site
20. barracks site
21. gymnasium site
22. Signal Corps barracks site

The Eagle Historical Society and Museums (EHSM) and the Bureau of Land Management are planning a Centennial Celebration for the Fort Egbert National Historic Landmark, to be held July 30 through August 1. Invitees include descendants of Fort Egbert soldiers, the U.S. Army and the Signal Corps battalion, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy Seabees Reserve, federal and state government representatives, and the Boy Scouts of America.

Fort Egbert is the only standing frontier era fort of its kind in Alaska. It was built by the U.S. Army in 1899, next to Eagle, to provide assistance and maintain law and order among the miners working in the gold fields along the Alaska-Canada border.

In 1900, Judge James Wickersham established the first federal court in the interior of Alaska, building a courthouse in Eagle, which has since been restored. In 1901, with a permanent population of 300, Eagle became the first incorporated city in interior Alaska.

Fort Egbert contributed greatly to the settlement and economic development of Alaska. While civilians in Eagle organized the city government, the fort became a key communication center for Alaska when the 1,506-mile-long Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) was finished in 1903.

In 1911, with the conversion of telegraph communication to the wireless, Army companies left Fort Egbert, leaving only a caretaker and his family.

In 1925, a portion of the military reservation had been turned over to the Alaska Road Commission (ARC), who used several buildings to house their personnel and equipment. Many of the buildings were sold or salvaged by the ARC and Eagle residents. By 1940 the only buildings remaining of the more than forty-five existing in 1911 were the stable, granary, water wagon shed, a quartermaster's storehouse and one NCO quarters.

After statehood in 1959, the road commission became part of the state Department of Transportation, making the state owner of the ARC's portion of the military reservation and buildings.

In the 1950s, the residents of Eagle, alarmed by the condition of the fort's buildings, especially the large stable, organized the Eagle Historical Society to help with maintainance and restoration. The EHSM obtained fifty-year leases for three of the buildings. The Navy Seabees Reserve flew in equipment and men to make repairs.

U.S. Senator Ted Stevens secured funds for restoration work in 1975. A cooperative agreement with the state made BLM owner and caretaker of the present Fort Egbert-National Historic Landmark.

In 1991, the EHSM, the City of Eagle and BLM signed a cooperative agreement to continue protecting significant cultural resources and historic properties within the Eagle Historic District.

BLM volunteers "Making a Difference"

As you plan your summer trip to the Arctic Circle or Prudhoe Bay, allow enough time at the Yukon River crossing to meet an adventurous couple who recently received the Bureau of Land Management's national award — *Making a Difference* — for volunteers.

Bob and Thelma Bowser, residents of Orlando, Florida, volunteer their summers at the BLM's Yukon Crossing Visitor Contact Station, meeting people who travel the Dalton Highway.

Driving north to Alaska to work is about as far from Florida as you can get in the United states. The Bowsers have spent their last seven summers managing the remote visitor contact station 150 miles north of Fairbanks, and providing information and other assistance to travelers.

The Bowsers were honored along with eight other BLM volunteers and three BLM employees at the national volunteer awards ceremony held in April at the historic Charles Sumner School Museum in Washington, D.C. The 1999 winners represent excellent examples of volunteer work on public lands.

"The BLM's Volunteer Program is one of the best things going in the federal government," says Tom Fry, acting director of BLM, at the ceremony. "The volunteers and BLM employees honored today represent only a small fraction of the exceptional contributions that are made every day by thousands of people on public lands throughout the country. We're extremely proud of and grateful to those who give their time and talents freely to improve the public lands."

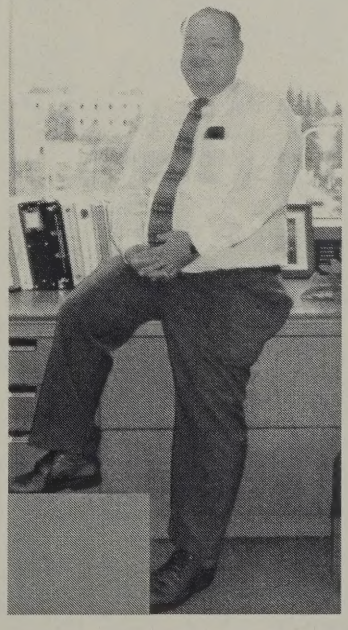
BLM recruits more than 20,000 volunteers each year to perform a variety of jobs, from campground host to archaeologist to educator. In some cases, campgrounds and other recreation sites would be closed were it not for volunteers.

A national panel of BLM and partners selected the winners from nominations submitted by all 12 BLM state offices and the National Interagency Fire Center. Winners were selected for their exceptional contributions in making a difference in the management of the public lands, rather than for length of service or number of hours contributed.

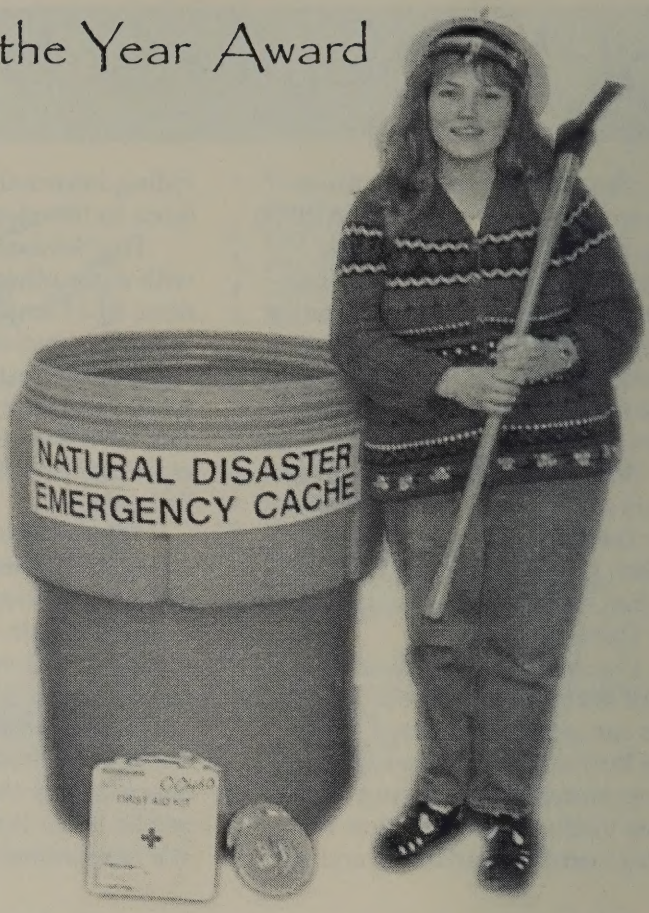
BLM-Alaska has new state director

Francis (Fran) Cherry is the new state director for BLM-Alaska. Cherry, a 30-year veteran of BLM, most recently served as associate state director of BLM's Montana/Dakotas State Office.

During his career with BLM, Cherry has worked as a natural resource specialist and area manager for the River Resource Area in Vernal, Utah; regional planner and chief of the Branch of Planning in the Colorado State Office; and manager of the Roswell District Office in New Mexico. Cherry also served in Washington, D.C. as energy policy coordinator and chief of the Branch of Solid Leasable Minerals.



BLM wins Federal Employee of the Year Award three years running



For the third year in a row, the Bureau of Land Management - Alaska once again walked away with the Federal Employee of the Year Award in the community service category, thanks to Dominica Van Koten.

Van Koten, a land surveyor for the Division of Cadastral Survey, wowed the judges with her seemingly endless volunteer activities. She is especially fond of the Special Olympics, having been a scorekeeper for track and field competitions, a coordinator and coach for the bowling team, and assistant coach for the Nordic Ski Team.

Van Koten is a member of the Eagle River Coordination Group, which conducts search and rescues; a health and safety officer for the Eagle River South Fork Volunteer Fire Department; and the list continues.

Van Koten says her mother worked with handicapped people and her family has often volunteered a helping hand.

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